

Enhancing Cooperation Between Employers and Guardsmen/Reservists

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Mr. Bob Hollingsworth

National Committee for Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve, Washington, DC

Executive Director

Testimony

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the importance of employer support for the members of the National Guard and Reserve.

This past weekend, the Secretary of Defense recognized fifteen employers nationwide by presenting them with the Employer Support Freedom Award, the Department of Defense's highest honor recognizing employers for going "above and beyond" the requirements of law to support their employees who serve our nation in the National Guard and Reserve. I am honored to be joined here today by Dennis Donovan of Home Depot and Christine Bierman of Colt Safety, Fire and Rescue. Both firms are 2004 recipients of the Freedom Award. The rigorous selection process for the Freedom Award begins with a member of the Guard or Reserve, or a family member of a Guardsman or Reservist, nominating the employer for the award. I am pleased to report to you that we had over fifteen hundred nominations for the 2005 Freedom Awards.

In 1994, Congress passed the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act, or USERRA as it is more commonly known. It updated the 50 year-old Veterans' Reemployment Rights (VRR) Act, to provide a broader range of protections and incorporate many court decisions relative to VRR. USERRA prohibits discrimination on the basis of military service and establishes the conditions under which an employee may return to employment following Active Duty, Active Duty for Training, or Inactive Duty for Training. For a Guardsman or Reservist to continue to serve, knowing his or her civilian employment is protected by law is extremely important. Knowing that his or her employer supports his or her service to guarantee our national security is equally important.

Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve is the Department of Defense organization responsible for gaining and maintaining support from all public and private employers for the men and women of the National Guard and Reserve. Through an aggressive employer outreach effort, we educate and inform employers on their responsibilities under USERRA and encourage them to go "above and beyond" to support their employees serving in the National Guard and Reserve.

We recognize that there are employers within the private and public sectors that cannot provide differential pay or health benefits because of public policy or economic constraints. Going "above and beyond" is not limited to differential pay or continuation of health benefits. There are many things an employer can do that carry little or no price tag, and in many cases, these "little things" are every bit as meaningful, if not more so, to the employee serving in the Guard and Reserve.

Army Reserve Lieutenant Chad Souers of Northport, Alabama, sat down at a computer in Tikrit, Iraq, to nominate his employer for a 2004 Freedom Award. He acknowledged that

his employer, Wal-Mart, provided differential pay and paid his portion of his civilian health insurance, but elaborated on Wal-Mart's personal touches. His boss, Fred Twilley, made regular phone calls to Lieutenant Souers' wife to ensure that she and their infant daughter were coping with his absence. Mr. Twilley and Lieutenant Souers' Wal-Mart associates invited Mrs. Souers to the store on their wedding anniversary for a surprise anniversary party. Lieutenant Souers' Wal-Mart associates sent flowers to Mrs. Souers on Valentine's Day and Mothers' Day to help with the pain of separation on those important days. Lieutenant Souers said, "They have repeatedly gone out of their way to include my wife and daughter in the Wal-Mart family during my absence as only dear friends could. All of this has given me the peace of mind when I needed it the most, knowing that there were so many people looking after my loved ones when I was unable to."

The Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department is a public sector agency that goes "above and beyond" in supporting its employees who serve in the Guard and Reserve. Sheriff Bill Young has assigned a family support coordinator within each of the department's area commands to maintain contact with the families of deployed Guardsmen and Reservists. Not only do his area commanders maintain e-mail contact with deployed employees, but so do the members of the deployed employee's squad. The Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department instituted a leave donation policy allowing any employee to donate unused leave so that Guardsmen and Reservists may have extra paid leave when they return from mobilization. Army Reserve Captain Gabriela Hatfield-Cook said, "To their great credit, the officers and employees of the Las Vegas Metro Police Department stand behind their deployed comrades without reservation."

Coast Guard Reserve Chief Warrant Officer Norm Chapman of Olympia, Washington has been a Reservist the entire eighteen years he has worked for the South Puget Sound Community College. While South Puget Sound Community College is unable to provide differential pay, Mr. Chapman notes that the college grants Veterans Preference credit points for most positions, provides recognition of Guard and Reserve service through various college-wide activities, and upon several occasions, the school's automotive department made repairs to his family's vehicle, reducing the stress on his wife during the mobilization. Not only did the college's public relations department publish stories about his experiences on active duty, they ensured he was informed about news from the college while he was away, enabling him to return to work with some knowledge of what had happened during his absence. Mr. Chapman said, "After the events of September 11th, a few of us employees have been called up more than once, and I have heard nothing but positive words of encouragement from the administrative team. I feel totally confident that my job and position is fully protected by my employer and that they truly care about my Reserve participation."

Lieutenant General Steve Blum, the Chief of National Guard Bureau frequently says that we recruit the soldier but retain the family. In order for an employee to feel secure in continuing to serve in the National Guard or Reserve, not only must he or she be confident that they will return to their job and face no penalty for their service, but also that his or her employer supports their service to our national security. The Department of Defense recognizes that we share almost half of our workforce with America's employers, and these employers share the sacrifices of our Guardsmen and Reservists. On behalf of a grateful nation, the Department of Defense thanks these employers.

If National Guardsmen and Reservists are indeed "twice the citizen", then their civilian

employers are “twice the patriot.” America’s employers are inextricably linked to our nation’s security.

Thank you, and I will be happy to answer your questions.